



# WORLD EDUCATION

## **Thinking Beyond “Increased Participation”**

### **Integrating Civics and Adult ESOL**

Andy Nash, World Education, 2010

The New England Literacy Resource Center (NELRC) /World Education has been supporting efforts by adult literacy and ESOL programs to engage students in civic participation projects since 1997. Whether to prepare adults to be informed voters or to help them develop the knowledge and skills needed to participate in community efforts, small groups of educators have come together to explore the possibilities of integrating civic participation and adult education. This paper will outline the NELRC’s efforts to develop a guiding process for civic participation projects that reflects the lessons learned from dozens of past projects. The model is informed by current discussions in civic education, developments in adult learning theory and research, and our own work with a diverse set of adult programs, including citizenship, ABE, ESOL, and bilingual ESOL classes.

### **Civic Education**

While there has been general consistency in how ESOL programs have interpreted civics, outside of adult education there is an active dialogue about the aims of civic education (in K-higher education) and the best practices for achieving those aims. The debate rests, largely, on two underlying schools of thought about what constitutes “democracy.” The *procedural* view focuses on the form and process of government – the rules and procedures by which decisions are reached. Procedural democracy emphasizes the principles of universal participation, political equality, majority rule, and responsiveness by a representative government. It is concerned with maintaining active and equal participation among the electorate.

The *substantive* view concentrates on the impact of government actions – that is, whether or not government policies fulfill the democratic ideals of fairness and justice. It is concerned about the undemocratic outcomes that may result from democratic processes - for example, majority rule that denies certain groups their human rights; technically democratic elections where only a minority of the population votes; or a “free press” that is actually owned by a small concentration of media corporations.

These competing views of democracy then impact how we define citizenship\*. Sordna Foundation researchers Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne have identified three kinds of participant citizens, which are described in Kevin Mattson’s book, *Engaging Youth: Combating the Apathy of Young Americans toward Politics*. The researchers distinguish between

a 'personally responsible citizen,' a 'participatory citizen,' or a 'justice-oriented citizen.' The first 'works and pays taxes, obeys laws, and helps those in need during crises such as snowstorms and floods.' The second 'actively participates in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state, and national levels.' The third 'critically assesses social, political, and economic structures and explores collective strategies for change that challenge injustice and, when possible, addresses root causes of problems (Mattson: 42).

The majority of civics education materials available in adult education reflect the first two notions of citizenship, both of which prepare people to participate in the system as it is, accepting it as an effective, functional process. The third notion does not make this assumption; it expects citizens to critically analyze and question the structures that are set up to make decisions about their lives. Merrifield, paraphrasing Gaventa (1999) adds "that development of critical consciousness is also essential for full citizenship. An underlying critical or questioning stance, an attitude of inquiry, a skepticism toward authority, can be seen as an underlying disposition that is essential to democratic participation and protection of freedoms (Merrifield, 6). She goes on to suggest that, what should perhaps be central in citizenship education is preparation for dealing with conflictual relationships and facing difficult choices in complex societies (Merrifield, 21.) What we have taken from this civics literature is a reminder to be explicit about our own definitions of citizenship, and to evaluate the ways our instruction does or does not build the capacity of all three types of citizens.

### **Adult Learning**

Merrifield's attention to skills that go beyond the traditional adult ESOL curriculum is mirrored in the system reform initiative called "Equipped for the Future" (EFF). That effort has identified 16 skills, including "Advocate and Influence," "Learn through Research," "Resolve Conflict and Negotiate," and "Cooperate with Others," that underlie the ability to effectively carry out key activities in the adult roles (worker, family member, and community member/citizen). The activities associated with the community member/citizen role were identified through structured feedback sessions with 257 adults engaged in a variety of civic activities and organizations. The consensus "role map" that emerged includes such items as:

- Figure out how the system that affects an issue works
- Find, interpret, analyze, and use diverse sources of information, including personal experience
- Strengthen and express a sense of self that reflects personal history, values, beliefs, and roles in the larger community
- Reflect on and reevaluate your own opinions and ideas
- Influence decision makers and hold them accountable

What this suggests is that the unofficial curriculum content that student-centered educators have always included in their lessons - speaking up for one's rights, self-advocacy, preserving important aspects of one's culture and identity - should be recognized as legitimate course goals equal to the communication skills and competencies that currently anchor ESOL curricula.

EFF also offers useful guiding principles, based in research on adult learning and cognition that supports the following:

- that adults have purposes for learning and need to see the relevance of their instruction to those purposes
- that we use skills and knowledge contextually; the situation we're in and what we're trying to accomplish determine how we apply the skill (writing an absentee note to your child's principal would call upon different writing strategies than writing your grocery list, for example)
- that adults bring a great deal of experience of life, language, and learning which can be transferred to new contexts if made explicit and transparent (metacognition)

These principles offer us some direction in how to effectively integrate language education with civics education. They suggest that we use relevant civics/community themes and activities as the context in which we can build on the "lived" prior knowledge of students to prepare them for new linguistic and cultural challenges. Immigrant and refugee adults have a lifetime of experience as citizens and community members that they bring to each new civic task in this culture. Their experiences, assumptions, and expectations need to be explored as they figure out how to apply their skills to the new context. Based on past experience, what does it mean to be a citizen? To live in a democracy? What do they expect interactions with the police, schools, government, etc. to be like? How did they participate in their communities before and how might they now? In valuing the prior knowledge and experience that adults possess, we are encouraged to reflect on and compare diverse ideas and opinions and, by extension, to question single or simple explanations of the world. This stance of critical inquiry underlies the justice-oriented notion of citizenship.

### **Lessons Learned from the Field**

Our own experience providing technical assistance, facilitating workshops, guiding sharing groups, and developing materials with EL/Civics programs indicates that it's possible to address all three types of citizenship at all levels of the curriculum. Yet most programs approach them as though they emerge in a predictable developmental order. The usual sequence is that, at the lowest language levels, adults are taught the basic legal and cultural expectations of their new community in order to be a 'personally responsible citizen.' As they become better oriented to the society (and often for purposes related to their children), they move on to content that supports their participation in local activities and obligations such as school events. Those working toward legal citizenship, in particular, learn about exercising their civic rights and responsibilities. The themes concerning 'justice-oriented citizens' (current events, social policies, labor issues, etc.) are typically deemed too abstract and distant from daily demands to keep lower-level students engaged, and often do not appear (if at all) until intermediate levels.

This is, however, a generalization that gets challenged when students find the issues compelling enough, as they did after 9/11, when one teacher's high beginner class found ways to discuss the role of a good leader, the causes of terrorism, and paths to peace (see Kelly Martin's piece at [www.nelrc.org/civicteachers/iraq.htm](http://www.nelrc.org/civicteachers/iraq.htm)). And in classes that incorporate bilingual discussion (which then

becomes the basis for practice in English), low level English students have ventured into such areas as police involvement in drug trafficking, global trade, and housing discrimination. We approach every teaching context as having the potential to foster all three kinds of citizenship, and encourage the exploration of the possibilities at every level.

As we've looked across seven years of civics-related instruction, we've discovered some consistent patterns that have informed our thinking about civic participation and have helped us articulate a process that supports a broad definition of citizenship.

### **1) Laying the Groundwork**

Underlying effective civic participation are the capacities to understand and articulate one's own beliefs, to listen to others, and to appreciate the complexity of most social issues beyond simple black and white answers. In the spirit of building these skills and dispositions – and I imply here that we all need reinforcement in these areas, not that immigrant adults are lacking in them – many instructors have found it useful to start off with discussions of key terms such as “community,” “citizen,” “freedom,” and “democracy,” which allows students to compare their understandings, experiences, and expectations, and sets a big picture context for thinking about civic involvement. Others have started by creating democracy in their classrooms, involving students in setting up structures for decision-making (majority rule? consensus?) about project topics and activities. These kinds of activities elicit the importance of an inclusive, respectful process of participation.

### **2) Making Connections**

It is tempting, when facilitating civics projects, to select and discuss issues in isolation. Classes may focus on concerns about health care access, or the struggle for bilingual education, or their fears about losing jobs, without considering the big picture civic and social justice issues that connect these concerns. One manageable way to show the connection is to start with a discussion of how our public money is spent. How do our priorities compare to how the government actually uses our tax money? “Following the money” opens the door to a wide-ranging set of important civics topics – where our tax dollars go (locally and federally), how much our public services cost, what the spending priorities should be, who should pay how much, etc. – that links very concrete concerns to a larger conversation about fairness and equity in a democracy.

Tom Smith, teaching an ESOL class co-sponsored by a community-based organization and a community college, described his class discussion this way:

In a general discussion about "civics," we talked about the idea that communities have to make collective decisions on how to meet the general good of the society and in that process individuals sometimes had to make sacrifices that didn't satisfy their own immediate narrow interests. . . . To make the discussion real, students were asked to consider that nearly every March, Vermont voters consider whether to pay more taxes to support the schools. An example of the effects of a property tax increase on a \$100,000 house was used in a hypothetical vote, and in that vote, the class narrowly defeated the tax increase. Here was a concrete example of having to define the public

good and matching that with individual sacrifice - namely, paying higher taxes.  
(<http://www.nelrc.org/cpcc/activecitizen.htm>)

In addition to developing their ability to analyze the pros and cons of this issue, the class had an opportunity to discuss their views of “self-interest,” and to understand that public policy is a balance between individual and community needs. Tom’s class went on to study taxes in greater depth (how much different income groups pay, where it goes), relating it to the struggles they were having trying to make a living wage. They talked about which policies – tax rates, minimum wage, etc. – were voted on by their representatives, and could therefore be influenced by voters.

Looking at how resources are distributed is also a way to illustrate the relationship between national, state, and local issues (federal and state budget cuts that lead to the closing of the free after-school program, for example) and to look for relationships among seemingly distinct issues. For instance, in one program, students advocating for “no cuts” to adult education services were also quite vocal about supporting the “no taxes” gubernatorial candidate. They didn’t see the relationship between taxes and the very services they were demanding, nor that “no cuts” to adult education would probably mean deeper cuts to the health services and day care they also needed.

### **3) Remembering the Purpose**

Project-based learning, which is explicitly organized around the creation of some kind of product or performance that will be shared publicly, offers a very helpful structure within which to learn about civics. Having a concrete goal can keep the learning process focused and offers a satisfying sense of accomplishment and completion. However, in adult education settings, where time is limited, the civics learning can sometimes get shortchanged in the interest of completing a final product. Without enough time for exploration of the content, some projects inadvertently end up encouraging adults to produce or act before they’ve had a chance to adequately consider all of the issues, options, and consequences. Teachers need to be careful about keeping the focus on *informed* action based on *well-considered* conclusions. From our sample, short-term projects were often best-spent exploring a current events topic in depth so that students would understand what was happening around them and why. The products were simply the considered written opinions students developed during the course of study.

### **4) Reflection**

Reflection on not only what was learned but on how it related to students’ stated learning needs was key to student satisfaction with the projects. Naming what was learned was helpful a) for noticing and appreciating how much learning can take place outside of a workbook, b) for internalizing and remembering the lessons, and c) for self-assessment. Although many teachers anticipated having to convince students that they were learning English and information that would be useful in daily life, classes that engaged in a reflective process were consistently able to articulate the value of the instruction.

### **5) Building Community**

In order to sustain student interest, civic participation needs to engage them in more than problem-solving – it needs to offer a sense of connection to others and an experience of people working together to make a difference. Teachers that built a sense of community in their classes, spent time getting to know one another, acknowledged the understanding that students brought from their experiences here as well as from their own cultures, acted as co-investigators in the inquiry rather than experts, and celebrated student discoveries as well as student products, typically reported greater student engagement with the projects. These teachers demonstrate that fostering relationships is as important as getting things done or, perhaps, that one can't be done without the other.

### **An Evolving Model**

Based on the lessons learned from EFF, civics education, and an ever-growing library of civic participation projects, the NELRC has documented a guiding process that aims to develop the qualities of all three types of citizens. We support a process that:

- orients newcomers to their communities
- deepens understanding of issues
- increases the ability to articulate ideas and opinions and to listen to others'
- engages adults in weighing options and making informed choices
- creates possibilities for community, inside and outside class, and
- develops skills and knowledge that can be transferred to new situations

The process is laid out in a series of steps that guide civic participation projects. We are not convinced that a single sequence prevails and encourage practitioners to move the pieces around to suite the class. The most recent version of the process is as follows:

#### **1. Identify and prioritize student concerns**

This step is your foundation, and needs to be explored thoroughly so that you settle on a topic that genuinely reflects student interests and can lead to a project that students own. Finding out what's on the minds of students happens most naturally through unplanned, everyday conversations about life. To intentionally elicit their concerns, however, you might construct activities that ask more directly:

- What did you expect life in the U.S. to be like? How does this compare to how it is for you?
- Imagine a friend wants to move to this community - what would you tell her? (write a letter)
- If you were the mayor, what's one thing you would work on immediately? (interview a partner)

Or, you can use the sometimes more effective indirect approach:

- community maps: create maps of the neighborhood and use them to introduce others to your community
- news: look through newspapers (or easy-to-read news) and talk about which stories are most important to you
- the budget: given a fixed amount of money, decide on the priorities for the city (or state or nation) and how you would spend the money
- Once the concerns have been named, decide together on the top priorities.

## 2. Draw out prior knowledge and understanding of students

This step draws out the varied perspectives and experiences of students, and also serves as a needs assessment for what they need or want to learn. What is their experience with the prioritized issue?

What do they already know about:

- Who is affected by this issue
- Who makes decisions about this issue
- The various perspectives on the causes/definitions of the problem (and how these definitions then shape the choice of solutions)
- History of the issue; what has been done in the past
- Current community involvement; organizations that work on this issue

Framed by the needs of a citizenship class, teacher Brian Mahoney

(<http://www.nelrc.org/cpcc/amerhistory.htm>) focused on this step to examine the subjectivity of history. In preparation for reading about Christopher Columbus . . .

Students were asked to write the story of Columbus as they remembered it, using a journalistic style of answering who, what, when, where, and why. Each cultural group was allowed to work together and talk over what they had been taught in their country. The groups then compared their stories with other cultural groups. Most of the basic information was the same, although some knew more than others, including one Russian man who knew more than I did!

Small groups were asked to write their definitions of "discovered" and "the New World," since these appeared in nearly all of their narratives about Columbus. They said that "discovered" meant: to find a new thing or place, or to be the first person to find something, and that the "New World" might be America, Asia, a new country, or a place we didn't know about before.

We continued to talk about why Columbus came here. Further readings and discussions led to the conclusion that he came here to make money for Europe. This then led to a discussion of making money and how it often benefits some and hurts others. They couldn't really think of who Columbus could have hurt by coming here for riches to bring back to Europe. We then asked who was here before Columbus. Some thought nobody was here. We did a few readings on Native Americans and their spread across North and South America. This was an eye-opener for some that allowed us to revisit our understanding of Columbus "discovering" America. . . .

. . . Students questioned how people who came here for freedom and to escape persecution could then persecute and treat the natives so badly. This also led, thanks to our Russian scholar, to a very good discussion of "propaganda" and who writes history and how it depends on whose version you are reading.

We talked about how there are always two sides to a story, and both should be included in history. One student even brought in her child's history book from school which had no mention of the impact of Columbus on Native Americans. Our discussions had raised her awareness of the issue, and helped her participate more fully in her daughter's education.

### **3. Build knowledge by investigating questions and analyzing information**

This step reminds practitioners to create opportunities to deepen understanding before moving to action. What new information could be added to what students already know to help them make informed decisions about their next steps? This is also one step where students can do activities that feel more school-like – activities that involve skill practice such as rehearsing a phone conversation, taking notes, or reviewing vocabulary in order to, for example:

- Read and understand letters to the editor representing divergent views
- Interview guest speakers
- Develop and conduct community surveys, or
- Visit organizations or attend events

But collecting and sharing new information is not the end of the process. We have found that it's common for practitioners to wrap up the project here, after a well-organized student presentation of the information. This misses the opportunity to use information for a crucial civic purpose – deliberation, reconsideration of previously held views, reflection on what/whose information is or is not readily available (and why), and analysis of the meaning of this information.

### **4. Use new knowledge**

This step is a natural stopping point for many classes, either because of time constraints or because students are not ready to do something specific with their new understanding. For those who are ready to continue, this is a point at which some decisions need to be made. Often, this step is framed as, “What do you want to do?” but we’ve found this to be an overwhelming question. We prefer to ask, “Who do you think needs to know about this? What do you want them to know and why? How might you express yourselves to them? What is the purpose of doing anything about this? If you take action, what do you want to achieve? Consider some possibilities:

- Voting
- Advocating with decision-makers
- Speaking/writing to peers (about community resources, their rights, etc.)
- Educating other audiences
- Building dialogue across communities
- Helping out/volunteering
- Working with an organization

What kind of action best fits with what you want to achieve? These discussions and decisions will lead you back to more skill-building, as students prepare to communicate with others. Their action might involve other EFF skills as well, such as advocacy or planning.

## 5. Document and reflect on learning

Although this step is listed last, the documentation of learning about both language and civic participation is something that needs to be considered up front and carried out in an on-going way. The learning will be best retained if there is explicit talk about it that helps students become metacognitively aware of what they're doing and why, what they're learning and how they know. As a basis for these discussions, you can have students document (through notes, charts, photos, etc.) their work and reflect on it regularly. Then reinforce it by having them present their work (what happened, what they learned, ideas for next steps, etc.) to others.

### A Project Example

Sidney Storey teaches an elective, mixed-level, civic participation class to ESOL students at SCALE. When she facilitated this project, her class was meeting for 3 hours a week for 7 weeks. Sidney described her first steps this way:

When a new group starts, the first thing we do is talk about the rights and responsibilities in our own class, so they're already being asked to think about what is fair or not, just in terms of our group, and to think about what their rights are. We spend time just organizing ourselves in a group - how do you deal with controversy? how do you deal with things that concern you? What examples can you think of of someone working to change a system? We create a classroom bill of rights and learn about the rules of a meeting. Then they brainstorm the things they're concerned about in the community and we vote on the top priority.

In this group, what came up was a concern about homelessness. For many of them the question was, "How can we come to this country without speaking English and we have a house and these people don't?" Since I see my role as connecting student with information, I suggested that we bring our questions to someone from the Somerville Homeless Coalition. We prepared for the guest speaker by drafting our questions and planning their sequence.

During his visit, they were stunned by his answers about the number of homeless in Somerville, the conditions that lead to homelessness, the amount of money designated to deal with homelessness, the lack of housing and beds in the shelters, and the statistics on homeless veterans and the mentally ill. Their concerns grew further when they learned about homeless families, something they hadn't imagined. They couldn't believe that a country this rich could allow this. They compared family systems in their countries, where extended families deal with these issues on their own, and here. A couple of students blamed the homeless for their plight or were suspicious of the homeless bureaucracy, but both left the meeting with a different perspective. Afterwards, the students decided to visit the Coalition to learn more and then used the information to develop presentations for the other classes and organize a clothing drive that yielded over 100 winter coats.

In this example, we can see elements of all three forms of citizenship. The concern for helping others exemplifies the “personally responsible citizen,” the engagement with a civic organization in order to improve the life of the community illustrates the “participatory citizen,” and the attention to homelessness as an issue of policy choices and social systems rather than individual hard luck marks the “justice-oriented citizen.” Unlike other projects, where Sidney’s students have gone on to advocate for legislative and policy changes, this group chose to respond with charity to a local need. Yet they understand that the solution to homelessness rests with broader social change on political and cultural levels.

### **Conclusion**

The country’s policymakers make decisions that affect the lives of immigrants here, as well as the lives of those left behind in their home countries. Many of our students are interested, concerned, and aware of the impact that U.S. laws and policies have on the lives they and their children will lead. If we want to build the capacity for engaged and active citizenship – for holding decision makers accountable to their communities and responsible for their rhetoric - then EL/Civics classes need to provide a venue for not just comprehending, but also critically examining the systems we have. We need to aim not only for an increased quantity of civic participation, but for high quality participation. That, we believe, means developing all three of Westheimer and Kahne’s models and claiming this full, broad definition of citizenship.

\*We use the term “citizens” to denote residents of a community, regardless of legal citizenship status.

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